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PHOTOS COURTESY OF MUTEK
Austria's Radian mixes live, digital and analog sounds.

Mutek returns to its roots

Emphasis on intimacy this year

Sixth edition of festival of 'music, sound and new technologies' eschews headliners

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GAZETTE MUSIC CRITIC

The term "grass roots" is not one you expect when discussing a cutting-edge electronic music festival. Yet it came up several times in a conversation with Mutek founder and programming director Alain Mongeau in reference to this year's sixth edition, which begins Wednesday and runs through Sunday.

Whereas Mutek's profile had been steadily growing in recent years, the fest pulled back after last year's fifth anniversary. The result is a more intimate and hopefully more personal event, according to Mongeau.

The first evidence of the new approach is in the lack of big-name draws in this year's lineup. "There are no headliners," Mongeau said.

It's a contrast to last year, which featured Canadian techno star Richie Hawtin, or 2003, highlighted by Britain's Matthew Herbert.

"We're surfing on the hope that people recognize Mutek for what it is – that they trust us," Mongeau said.

Where Mutek had been hosting three nights at Metropolis during recent editions, there will be just one such night this year – next Saturday – and even then, there will be no superstar main attraction.

That show will feature Mutek regulars – Denmark's Monolake, Vancouver's Mathew Jonson and South American duo Sense Club (Ricardo Villalobos and Luciano) – as well as the North American premiere of Swiss group Gallopierende Zuversicht, known for its emphasis on live performance.

It's the type of program where fest-goers will just have to do as Mongeau said and trust a festival that has always been more about pushing boundaries than buffing people's comfort zones.

"Last year was the end of a cycle," Mongeau said. "After that, we felt we could go in one of two directions – of growth and bigger events, or of focusing on our real function, which is finding new talent and exposing people to the unknown."

They chose the latter. Still, Mongeau points out that the fest maintains its dual mandate of combining both upbeat and experimental strands of electronic music.

Wednesday and Thursday's programs are potentially more difficult, he notes. Audio and visual converge Wednesday at 8 at Ex-Centris, with Montreal's nAnalog and Norway's Biosphere on a bill that challenges perception and imagination.

Later that night, at 10:30 at the Just for Laughs Museum, Canada's Polmo Popo, Austrian-German group Kapital Band 1 and Austria's Radian each offer their mix of live instrumentation, digital and analog sounds.

A cross-section of upstart Montreal creators comes together in a free show Thursday at 5 p.m. at the Just for Laughs Museum. Experimental goes international later that night (10:30) at the same location, as artists from Germany, Argentina, Austria and the United States perform on an eight-speaker, "multi-stereophonic" setup.

Things open up on Friday, when worlds collide at Mutek's first ever two-room party at the Just for Laughs Museum.

Mutek's forays into Latin America – the festival staged its first event in Mexico City in April, has held an edition in Chile and is planning a Latin-American tour – are reflected next Saturday afternoon at 3 at the Just For Laughs Museum, with performances by artists from Chile, Argentina and Mexico.

And Sunday at 1 p.m., Mutek teams up with Montreal's tam-tam alternative, the Piknic Electronik on Ile Ste. Hélène. Later that night, the fest wraps up at the Just For Laughs museum with a roster that includes Brazil's Nego Moçambique.

"The reality of Mutek cannot be perceived only from Montreal," Mongeau said, explaining that the fest is creating an international community of electronic artists, and an increasing awareness about the possibilities of electronic music.

But the Montreal edition, he added, is a vista on that expanding world.

"The motto this year is 'passport for risk and discovery,' " he said. "A lot of that is because we have been so present on the international front."

Mutek takes place Wednesday through Sunday. Go to www.mutek.ca for program information, tickets and special packages. Also call Admission at (514) 790-1245 for tickets. For the Metropolis show, call Ticketpro at (514) 908-9090.

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Ricardo Villalobos, of duo Sense Club, returns.

There's nothing to fear at the Suoni per il Popolo festival of experimental music: just open your ears and let it all in

Lessons in listening

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUONI PER IL POPOLO
Han Bennink: not only the clown-prince of European jazz drumming, but its godfather.

It's impossible to encapsulate the amazing array of outward bound music by the world-renowned experimenters at the 26-night Suoni per il Popolo festival, which begins on Wednesday – but consider Follow Follow.

What started as a Fela Kuti dance band made up of Montreal's leading experimental musicians has – in the mysterious ways of musical freedom – morphed into something quite miraculously other.

And that kind of transformative experience is what the Suoni festival, celebrating its fifth anniversary, is all about. From free-jazz to rap to electronica to post-rock to avant-classical to spoken word in all manner of groupings, it's a natural environment for a project like Follow Follow. Including such forward-looking musicians as guitarist Rainer Wiens, saxophone legend Jean Derome and drummer Thom Gossage, the sextet plays its first CD launch on June 15.

Wiens is a 51-year-old master of prepared guitar (treated and taped with small objects) and kalimba (a hand-held African thumb-piano) in numerous experimental settings (theatre, dance, film). He recalls first hearing Fela Kuti's polyrhythmic African pop music in a second-hand Toronto record shop in the mid-'70s and was "amazed by this joyous sound and I just started dancing. At that very moment a beautiful woman walked in the store and ..." well, that's another story.

"It's really fun to play and almost get lost in," Wiens says. "The thing is, no one in the band condescends to this music. Quite often you get jazzers saying 'Hey, man, we're hip, we can play it.' Well, you can be a great jazz musician and be a crap country guitar player. There are things you get from listening and working and loving the music – that's what comes through in Follow Follow, the joy of playing it. But no one feels we're playing simple stuff, everyone plays who they are, they don't pretend to be something they're not."

Which, when you think about it, reflects the spirit of the Suoni per il Popolo (Sounds of the people). Started by Mauro Pezzente and Kiva Stimac, of the Casa del Popolo and La Sala Rossa (and Godspeed You! Black Emperor crowd), it's come to represent the spiritual centre of creative music-making in the fertile Mile End district (which has a huge musician population).

The festival blends reverence for the elders (Milford Graves, Wadada Leo Smith, Han Bennink, Willem Breuker, Joëlle Léandre, Mike Watt, John Heward) with today's innovators (Ken Vandermark, Sonic Liberation Front, d'bi young & dubbin revolushun, Electrelane, A Silver Mt. Zion, The Mile-End Ladies' String Auxiliary, Sam Shalabi, Bernard Falaise, jazz cellist Peggy Lee).

The Suoni keeps growing every year, and Pezzente is grateful for the modest government funding it began receiving last year. But it's a speck compared to what Spectra gets to mount the Montreal International Jazz Festival, Francofolies and others.

"I understand that [the downtown festivals] are good for the economy," says Pezzente, but that's the rub: The city and Spectra have decided that the "Quartier des Spectacles" (from St. Denis to Bleury Sts., and Sherbrooke St. to René Lévesque Blvd.) gets the overwhelming slice of government funding. "It's a strange idea. They're saying most of the shows in the entire city have to take place in this tiny eight-block area, and anything outside it doesn't get much."

Toni Blackman: rapper.

The reality is that the Casa-Sala enjoys mythic status in the francophone music scene (fascinated by the self-sufficient Godspeed phenomenon), not to mention the young knapsackers toting hip tourist guides who read about it in Spin or on the Internet.

"We know people come here from everywhere, from the suburbs, from 15-year-olds to 60s," Pezzente adds. "The funding agencies ask you who your public is. Well, everybody. No, it can't be everybody, they say. Well, that's the whole reason for the festival, it's for everybody."

While the Suoni is nowhere near the scale of the jazz festival, its quality is second to none and its variety is vanguard stuff. This stream of musicians comes from places and scenes (from Chicago to Amsterdam) rarely represented by other local festivals, not to mention Montreal's smorgasbord of sound, now internationally hyped. Compared with megaplex events, it's a saner way of fostering creativity in a relaxed festival setting, where visiting musicians stay a spell, and not just business as usual. The Suoni is filled with first-time events by musical leaders of many stripes, including a Liberator/Creator Series featuring women (Toni Blackman, Peggy Lee, among others).

The Casa people are resolutely neighbourhood-minded, believers in the small-scale human touch, yet they've become a clearing house for new sounds ("where the venues are intimate, the audiences excited and the musicians on fire," boasts its Web site). Amid Montreal's musical renaissance, they've become a power and a player in this city, even if those words turn them off. It's the music that drives this operation.

Thus the Suoni has forged alliances with renowned bassist

"We know people come here from everywhere ... from 15-year-olds to 60s."

William Parker's VisionFest in New York and Chicago's Velvet Lounge scene, whose patriarch is Fred Anderson and heir is Vandermark. The connections go a long way in fulfilling Pezzente's "dream" to create an experimental-music circuit of half a dozen or so cities in Canada and the United States.

This year the festival includes McGill's three-day Project on Improvisation, an annual event fostered by philosophy professor Eric Lewis, himself a loft jam veteran in New York and Montreal. In addition to lectures and performances by rapper Toni Blackman and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, there's the project highlight, An Afternoon on Improvising In and Between Music and the Visual Arts, a four-hour brain feast presented in co-operation with the Canadian Centre for Architecture (Sunday, June 5). Featured is legendary composer, performer and educator Bill Dixon.

Lewis confesses he was worried that arriving at "an academically responsible way of thinking about improvisational music" might "ruin my fun in music." The general public might fear not "getting" experimental music: "When I go to a Beethoven concert, I don't go to 'get' it, I go to feel it. It's not about, 'Ah, he employed the tone of Albert Ayler but was using the kind of subtle changes in dynamics more characteristic of Roscoe Mitchell' – well, the hell with that. Don't be scared because there's nothing to be scared of."

Wiens sums up the appeal of the Suoni fest: "Most people are so constantly surrounded by music that you lose the art of listening. It's like wallpaper, so when they're confronted with wallpaper that's more abrasive and not necessarily soothing, it's upsetting for people because they haven't developed the skill of listening. I mean, you can judge afterwards. An audience that listens makes an incredible difference to the musicians, you feel the quality of the silence and you play so much better."

Suoni per il Popolo runs from Wednesday to June 26, at Casa del Popolo, 4873 St. Laurent Blvd., (514) 284-3804, and La Sala Rossa, 4848 St. Laurent Blvd., (514) 284-0122. See www.suoniperilpopolo.org

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Musicians to watch for at this festival of 'sounds for the people'

Wadada Leo Smith (born 1941): As warm toned as Miles Davis, yet mystically rawer, this veteran of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians is no less accessible on recent superbly recorded outings on John Zorn's Tzadik label. One of the few horn players who can pull off a solo performance. (Saturday, June 4)

Milford Graves (1941): A leader of the 1960s avant-garde, with the likes of Sonny Murray and Rashied Ali, when drummers weren't just timekeepers but soul-shapers. Devotes himself to sonically breathtaking solo concerts. (Friday, June 10)

Willem Breuker (1944) Kollektief: The long-time kings of Amsterdam's cross-cultural scene – Weill, Gershwin, marching rhythms and café society perversions. Arguably the best small big-band of the last 30 years. Great panache greets dynamic arrangements and

Wadada Leo Smith, trumpeter.

richly off-kilter sonorities. (Thursday, June 9)

Hamid Drake (1955), for my money, is the most exciting drummer going – Motown meets outer space at the speed of light. Will play with the rugged Ken Vandermark (among America's free-jazz leaders) in the DKV Trio and with the dynamic flute player Nicole Mitchell in the Indigo Trio. (June 12 & 13)

Han Bennink (1942): Not only the clown-prince of European jazz drumming (meaning "anything/everything"), but also its godfather. There's nothing quite like watching him in performance – a human music box run amok (June 14).

Joëlle Léandre (1951): Masterful French double-bassist who has made a specialty of duets with a variety of instrumentalists: Her bowed technique is as dramatic as her fingers are nimble. She teams with Bay Area violinist India Cooke, who's played with Ray Charles, Sinatra, Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor. (June 17)

Peter Brötzmann (1941): Torrid saxophonist and clarinetist is the recognized father of the European free-music scene. He plays duets with drummer Nasheet Waits (June 21) and Montreal guitar hero Sam Shalabi (June 22).

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